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General semantics can be taught to young children by employing experimentation, role playing, and active discussion of personal reactions. The children are shown how verbal expressions can be used to reflect accuracy or distortion in what is desired to be expressed.

Certain fundamental principles emphasized are: 1) The world consists of processes that are ever changing to a greater or lesser degree. 2) No two things are indentical. 3) Characteristics of things and people are distributed along a continuum.4) Events can be predicted not with absolute certainty but with different degrees of probability. 5) People arrive at their knowledge via many methods. 6) Results of observations differ to different people. 7) Our language is highly limited.

The experiments show that children became aware of multiple causality, that they improved 85% in what is considered best on a table of personal values, that their expository writing improved, and that they could better perceive exceptions to common generalities.

New programs are being developed in cooperation with elementary school teachers.

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ED001823

COMMUNICATING SENSE AND NONSENSE

Effects of General Semantics Training Upon Some Fifth Grade Children*

By

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The Problem

Our children daily emit the most disnaying nonsense.

"I've *got* to get even, or they'll all think 'm chicken and beat up on me," says Joe vith the nodding assent of his buddies.

"Girls who are whizzes in math and scince will not be popular with boys," says Margaret, convincing herself to bury what night have been an outstanding talent.

"If I'm not tops at *something*, I'll never arn the respect of my father," says Bill vho is working himself into a learning roblem and a neurosis.

Our adult world resounds with communiations which are illogical, irrational, dogmatic and prejudiced, but which are nevertheless quite acceptable to the thinking nd behavior of large numbers of people. There is the mother who refuses to feed er baby Vitamin D because, "No one ever fed me that stuff." There are the ighly educated people who honestly beieve, "When Negroes move into a white eighborhood, real estate values will go own." Then there are countless numbers vho repeat such clichés as:

> You can't fight City Hall.
> Once a crook, always a crook.
> Like father, like son.
> Children must express themselves.
> Better dead than red.
> Money is the root of all evil.
> Woman's place is in the home.
> There's always room at the top.
> There will always be wars.

Few of us can doubt that closed-minded, ncritical, dogmatic thinking processes, reardless of how well articulated or grammatically correct, can lead to emotional isery and to destructive behavior. But ius far we have not been able to agree pon the kind of education that could preent or cure it.

What kind of education does the young iother need to make her receptive to the ediatrician's advice about Vitamin D? essons in manners? In grammar? In how respect the authority of highly eduated people? A course in human nutrion? A psychoanalysis?

I would subscribe to the kind of educaon which would enable an ordinary child feel he can doubt all the above clichés nd irrationalities just by hearing or read- be able to fight it when necessary and to avoid thinking up more of it themselves. And I am well aware that we cannot teach everybody psychology, sociology, genetics, nutrition, economics and political science. Unfortunately, according to the research of Milton Rokeach and others, many of us finish a full college and graduate program and still remain quite capable of thinking in bromides, stereotypes, dogmas, and absolutes. Clearly, the simple imparting of information is not enough. Lengthening the school day, solidifying the subjects, teaching via machines, creating national examinations, or eliminating driver's education probably won't help much either.

Possible Aid

When I discovered the science of General Semantics through the New York Society of General Semantics a few years ago, I began to have hope. I discovered that without knowing any "facts," I would be obliged to react with skepticism to any such statement as "When Negroes move into a white neighborhood, real estate values will go down." My skepticism is based upon the recognition that the idea is communicated in language which does not fit reality. How often in nature can we find an example of *anything* that says, "When x happens, y always follows?" Are there any such absolutes? The language of the statement requires qualification before I could entertain it. I might consider it, for example, if it read, "According to x, y, z reports produced by authors a, b, and c, when Negro groups 1, 2, and 3 moved into neighborhoods p, q, and r, during the time of l, m, and n, real estate values went down to x degree under y circumstances." I would still not be able to draw the conclusion, even in these specific examples, that there was any necessary cause and effect relationship between the events, nor could I be sure of the extent to which future events could be predicted from past events.

The sentence, "Woman's place is in the home," is immediately unacceptable just from the sound of it. There is an implication of "All women belong at home no matter what." The idea lacks the kind of qualification by which other events in nature are characterized.

The language of the sentence, "You can't fight City Hall" disqualifies it for cred- What does 'fight' mean? Throw a bomb, persuade through a petition, vote, sit-down strike? What does 'City Hall' mean? The mayor, the Democratic Party, anybody in authority? The sentence itself has no meaning; certainly it is not worth repeating or believing.

What I have been saying, in an oversimplified manner, is that with knowledge about the nature of our world and its processes, plus a sensitization to the ways in which language can express or distort truth, it is possible for people to think and talk more accurately, to recognize distortions from the lips and pens of others and to make mental corrections for them. My view of general semantics training is that it consists of studying the natural process of our world according to the best knowledge we have of modern science and then trying to correct our habits of thought and speech to fit what we know and how we know it.

At first consideration, it would seem absurd to hope that we could teach children relationships between science, epistemology and the structure of language. Yet, the way general semantics was taught to me by such persons as O. Ray Bontrager, Robert Holston, and Allen Flagg, convinced me that a course could be designed for children. Alfred Korzybski himself encouraged its use with children, and M. Kendig made broad use of it in her independent school for girls. Therefore, I designed an experimental study to determine whether children could be taught the material and to ascertain what effects the training might have upon their thinking.

The Experiment

Twenty-eight children from a fifth grade class in a school in Valley Stream were given a course consisting of 26 lessons over a period of five months. Fifty-six children from the same school and grade served as control subjects. They had essentially the same fifth-grade curriculum as the experimental class without exposure to general semantics. The children in the experimental and control groups ranged from average to superior on tests of intelligence and achievement. Before and after the course, a series of tests was given to both groups.

(*Continued on page* 14)

* Excerpts from an award-winning presen-

Communicating

(*Continued from page* 13)

The test results were analyzed by comparing the amount of gain the experimental group made with the gain (or loss) made by the control groups on a certain set of variables during the same period of time. The experimental group had had the same classroom teacher the previous year. Thus the effects of teacher personality and style would be largely reflected in test scores before the course was given. Changes in test results could be said to accrue more from the training factor than from the factor of teacher-personality.

The teaching method that I employed included much use of experimentation, role-play and active discussion of personal reactions. The children were asked to manipulate common, concrete objects, to observe and to evaluate their findings. They were taught that language and thought can be similarly manipulated, observed and evaluated. They were shown how verbal expressions can be used to reflect accurately or to distort badly what is "out there." And they were shown some ways to improve habits of evaluation and expression.

Emphasis was placed upon certain fundamental principles. For example: The objective world consists of processes that are ever changing to a greater or lesser degree. No two things are identical; no two events can be exactly duplicated. Characteristics of things and people are distributed along a continuum rather than in a set of categories. Events can be predicted not with absolute certainty but with different degrees of probability. People arrive at their knowledge of processes via many methods, ranging from simple visual perception to highly precise measurement tools. Results of observations differ to a greater or lesser degree among both people and machines; absolute accuracy is ephemeral. The language we use to describe our world of processes is highly limited; our words are abstractions in that they cannot tell all that there is to be known or said. Words reflect a selection of what could be said, and the selection reflects the unique characteristics and motivations of the human selector.

As far as I know, there does not yet exist a syllabus or an outline of a course for children, although one may soon be published. I built my course for the experimental children from my own knowledge. I also adapted some ideas from Minteer's book for older students, *Words and What They Do to You* (Harper and Row). Lessons were planned one at a time, each growing from the last.

The test questions were chosen to be easy enough for any fifth grade child to answer but which would reveal qualities of thinking which general semantics training, if effective and integrated, might influence.

Results showed that in five of the six tests used, the experimental group made significantly greater gains than the control group in critical, rational thinking, in open-mindedness rather than dogmatism, and in tolerance for human differences. The following are samples of some of the research questions utilized before and after the course was given.

A Test of Inferential Thinking

For example, the children were asked to respond to the following: "Johnny ate 3 green apples after school. That night he had cramps in his stomach. His brother said the apples caused his stomach cramps. Do you think the apples caused his cramps? Explain why you agree or disagree." This item was scored as "correct" if the child indicated awareness of possible alternatives, rather than agreeing dogmatically that the apples caused the cramps. Obviously, the item was designed to see whether the children could resist jumping to conclusions, were aware of multiple causality, could recognize that because two things occur in time, juxtaposition does not necessarily mean that one causes the other. At the beginning, only one child from the combined experimental and control groups gave a "correct" answer. After the five month period, 74% of the experimental group, in contrast with 5% of the control group, gave "correct" answers. Here are some examples of control group reasoning. "I agree that the apples caused cramps in his stomach because they were *rotten*." " . . . because it's a known fact that apples give you cramps." "I agree because whenever I eat green apples, my mother always tells me the same thing." " . . . one unripe apple could make you sick. He had three, so he's bound to get sick."

Children who had had the general semantics course replied, " . . . he may have been sick the night before, so we don't

PERSONAL VALUES: TEN CONTINUA FOR SCORING COMPOSITIONS

People who are Less Accepting of Reality:	*People who are More Accepting of Reality:*
Value constriction, repression of thought and behavior. Intolerant of stimulation.	Value expansion, expression of thought and behavior. Enjoy stimulation.
Value rigid conformity to rules. Are intolerant of petty infractions.	Appreciate need for flexible responses according to varying situations. Are intolerant of severe deviations.
Value obedience to authority figures.	Value necessity for taking responsibility for self-control and self-determination.
Value having absolute traits of character and behavior.	Value behavior appropriate to changing situations. Recognize change in self and others.
Perceive behavior in dichotomies: right-wrong; good-bad; black-white, etc.	Perceive behavior on a continuum with many shadings.
Value achievement of final goals.	Value the process of achievement, recognizing changing goals.
Value mainly future goals as incentives for immediate behavior.	Value "here and now" goals as well as future ones as incentives for immediate behavior.
Value achievement of a good reputation, avoidance of criticism, making a good impression.	Value "being one's self," being honest in thought and expression to others.
Value competition, success as compared to others.	Value cooperation, enjoyment of each other. Recognize mutual dependence.
Tend to blame, fear, reject others because of their differences.	Tend to accept others while recognizing wide variation in their behavior.

hat could have caused it." "It's very ossible it did, but something else might ave caused the cramps."

An Exposition of Personal Values

On another item the children were told, 'Make believe you could make the boys nd girls in your class behave any way you decide. Write a composition, describing how you would like them to be. How should they look, act, talk, or think? Explain why." This test was designed to ap what the children valued most in interpersonal behavior. To score the test, outlined a set of ten continua. His second ssay received a rating of "worse," "the ame," "improved," or "much improved," epending upon whether it evidenced more r less of the kind of thinking described n the accompanying table of Personal 'alues.

Striking differences appeared in favor of he experimental group. Eight-five percent nproved some or a lot. Only 14% stayed ssentially the same, and none got worse.)f the control group, 32% improved some r a lot, 46% stayed essentially the same, nd 22% got worse as rated in the manner described above.

Here are some excerpts of the kinds of mprovement which appeared most often n the experimental group. At the beginning, a child said (among other things), They should think like smart people." ater, she said, " . . . they should think he way they want to think. Then there would be many different ideas about hings." Another child said at first, "They hould think only clean thoughts," whereas ater she said, " . . . they could think any ay they want." One youngster was wise nough to say in her second composition, I really don't believe you would like it f everyone acted the way you wanted them o." A boy expressed considerable hoslity and rejection in his first essay. "Some oys in our class act like first graders. I hink they should act their own age. Some re bullys. They should be taught a lesson.)ther boys in our class don't talk very icely to younger children. In the thinking epartment. some children in our class tink' because they don't want to learn." lone of this hostility appeared in his second essay.

Some of the ideas which appeared in econd essays of the control group, but hich did not appear in the experimental roup were, "They should smile even when hey're in a bad mood." "You should always be quiet." "They should not think nless they are told to. When walking in he halls, they shouldn't talk. They houldn't listen because then they might ant to talk." "They should keep their hinking to themselves." "They would be olite and talk with an English accent." They should not use slang or think of

Expository Communication

The experimental group was able to improve much more than the control group in a simple task of expository writing. Asked to explain how dishes are washed in their homes, the experimental children showed a significant gain, while the controls actually lost ground. The compositions were scored on the degree to which the children could communicate the essential operations, mention items of essential equipment, and use explicative ideas such as how, where, when, and how much.

The experimental group also thought of more creative uses for a tin can while the control group thought of only a few, after the five months had elapsed.

"Is of Identity Test"

On the "Is of Identity Test," a revision of Weiss' test for adults, the children were required to perceive exceptions to common generalities. For example, to get a correct score, the child must see that not all men are fathers, that not all mothers are good, or that milk is not always good for people. It can be called a test of critical thinking. Eighty-nine percent of the experimental children gained on this test and none lost ground. Of the control group, sixty percent gained while twenty-five percent actually got lower scores after five months of schooling.

After the experiment, some other tests were given to the experimental group, and the entire fifth grade of another school was added for purposes of comparison. The experimental group surpassed all other classes, including two groups of fast learners. For example, some items of the California F Test were revised for children The items consist of a list of ideas commonly believed by persons with authoritarian character structures. A significantly higher percent of the experimental group disagreed with such ideas as, "People are either weak or strong," and "No normal, nice person could ever think of hurting a close friend or relative." In another test, the children were asked to write what they thought would be a good reply to a remark, "I hope no Negroes move in around here." In comparison to the other fifth graders, the experimental group had a significantly higher percent of responses which could be categorized as recognizing civil rights or as being unconcerned about racial differences.

Summary and Conclusions

Results of this research give substantial evidence that general semantics can be effectively taught to young children and that it can result in significant changes in thinking quality which do not ordinarily accrue to the same degree from the regular curriculum. More work needs to be done other subjects. At the present time, I am teaching a group of elementary school teachers. Together we are developing lesson plans for children from first through sixth grade, and they are trying the lessons with their own classes. Further research needs to be done to determine under what conditions the changes remain intact, to determine relationships between cognitive functioning and actual behavior and to explore relationships between rational thinking and mental health. Practitioners of school psychology, guidance, and social work may find that the teaching of general semantics to children and/or to teachers and parents can be a crucial expansion of their traditional services to the educational system.